



## Lelièvre says it is time for action to upgrade the railway

Gilles Gagné

NEW RICHMOND: – Gaétan Lelièvre, Member of the National Assembly for the riding of Gaspé, has mixed feelings about the Canarail study released on March 7 by the Gaspésie Railway Society. While he is glad to see some positive numbers in the document, he is eager to see the owner of the Matapédia to Gaspé line, Quebec's department of Transport, upgrade its infrastructures.

The Canarail study reveals that the cost of repairing infrastructure along the line, mainly bridges, would be \$86.3 million instead of \$122.4 million. Data released in 2014 by AECOM, another consultant used standards not adapted to the Gaspé line to make cost assessments.

Canarail also specifies that the freight traffic potential could reach 5,700 carloads by 2020, if the line is upgraded

all the way to Gaspé. That number is based on thorough interviews conducted with current and future customers. The level of freight traffic in 2015 on the line was 1,624 carloads, mainly originating from the Temrex sawmill in Nouvelle.

"The content of the study is a form of rehash. We have studied and studied the state of the line. It is a good thing that the cost of upgrading it is lower, but for now, my main worry is the (Quebec) government's lack of willingness to improve the line. It is time for action. I am worried that the government will wait until the rehabilitation cost really becomes prohibitive. Then, the Liberal government will be justified not to invest money on the line," explains Mr. Lelièvre, a Parti Québécois Member of National Assembly who is also critic for his party in regional development matters.

"When former Transport Minister Robert Poëti announced the acquisition of the line last year (in March), he committed to maintaining in good shape the Matapédia to Caplan stretch and the Percé to Gaspé portion. The government failed to live up to that commitment. Poëti found all kinds of reasons to rule out repairs on the Gaspé-Percé stretch, saying that the repairs on that portion would cost \$4 million instead of \$1.3 million," criticizes Gaétan Lelièvre.

Through neglecting to improve the Gaspé-Percé stretch, Transport-Québec forced the Gaspésie Railway Society and Escale Gaspésie to cancel the Amiral tourist train season, despite a promising number of trips with the cruise ship clientele.

"Each full train brings in \$15,000 for the tourist train. It is a profitable trip. About 30 ships stop in Gaspé and

the average sized and larger ships all book the tourist train. We had to wave goodbye to hundreds of thousands of spinoff dollars last year and I think we will also have to forget it for 2016 as well, if things don't move quickly. (...) So far, when Transport-Québec has touched the tourist train file, it has moved backwards," adds Mr. Lelièvre.

He thinks that the Matapédia to Gaspé line should have remained in the hands of the four MRCs located between Matapédia and Gaspé.

"He (Robert Poëti) disposed the region of its rail line. It (Transport-Québec) acquired the line for \$3.9 million, while the metal value is four, five, six times that amount. It is practically legalized robbery," states Gaétan Lelièvre.

He is anxious to see things moving in the right direction as soon as possible because

"as time passes, some people stop believing that we will regain our passenger train and our tourist train again. We also need to extend the freight service east of Caplan. It is a compulsory condition for the development of the region.

"As of now, the government of Philippe Couillard is acting as if it plans the closure of the region. Our limited train services, our vanishing bus service and the exaggerated cost of flying are depriving us of essential development tools. Paying \$1,500 to fly between Gaspé and Quebec City is unheard of but it is the current rate. Who can afford that? A very limited number of people can," says Gaétan Lelièvre.

The Canarail study was carried out in 2015 and the beginning of 2016 for a cost of \$130,000. It was commissioned by the Gaspésie Railway Society.